

THESES
CONCERNING
THOMAS
MÜNTZER

1489–1989

*Elaborated by scholars
from the German Democratic Republic*

*THESES
CONCERNING
THOMAS
MÜNTZER*

1489–1989

The present study was written
by an interdisciplinary group of scholars
from the GDR Academy of Sciences
and various GDR universities
which was chaired by Prof. Adolf Laube
and included Prof. Helmut Bock, Prof. Gerhard Brendler,
Prof. Siegfried Hoyer, Prof. Klaus Kinner,
Prof. Werner Lenk, Dr Sigrid Looss, Prof. Günter Vogler,
Prof. Siegfried Wollgast.

On 11 March 1988, a Committee for the preparation of the quincentenary celebrations of the birth of Thomas Müntzer in 1528, was set up in Berlin under the chairmanship of Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the SED Central Committee and Chairman of the GDR Council of State. The establishment of the Committee, which consists of figures from all walks of life in the German Democratic Republic, is the first in a series of events to mark the Thomas Müntzer anniversary in the GDR.

Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489 to 27 May 1525) is the most eminent figure representing the extreme left wing in the early bourgeois revolution in Germany, i.e. the Reformation movement and the Peasants' War from 1517 to 1525/26. At the beginning of an epoch of social upheaval marked by the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Thomas Müntzer, on the basis of his revolutionary interpretation of Christian teaching, wanted to bring about radical changes in society in the interests of the exploited and oppressed common people. He developed a theology of revolution aimed at overcoming all class rule. He recognized that the common people were the executors, and revolutionary power the method of this transformation. "For the first time in German history, Müntzer's concept of society raised the questions which were answered on a scientific basis by Marx and Engels" (Erich Honecker). Thomas Müntzer occupies a prominent place in the revolutionary traditions of the German people. He achieved worldwide recognition through the struggles and triumphs of the revolutionary labour movement in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The German Democratic Republic, rooted in German history as a whole and itself derived from the struggles which the

progressive forces of the people have waged over the centuries for social progress, is deeply committed to these traditions. Forty years after its inception, it commemorates the quincentenary of Thomas Müntzer in the knowledge that it has lived up to the legacy of all forces of progress in the history of the German people by defeating the exploiting classes and building an advanced socialist society. In the person of Thomas Müntzer we also pay tribute to all those who figured and fought in the early bourgeois revolution initiated by Martin Luther, thereby continuing a line of commemorative events which marked the 450th anniversary in 1967 of the beginning of the Reformation, the 450th anniversary in 1975 of the German Peasants' War and the death of Thomas Müntzer, and the 500th anniversary in 1983 of the birth of Martin Luther. At the same time, we pay homage to those figures in our later history who, particularly from the formation of the revolutionary labour movement in the 19th century, took up Müntzer's ideas, reinterpreted them in order to adapt them to new conditions and bring about social changes, and used the memory of Thomas Müntzer to activate their struggle for social progress. Under the fresh impact of the defeat suffered by the democratic forces in the revolution of 1848/49, Friedrich Engels praised the lasting significance of Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' War of 1525 when he wrote, "The German people also have their revolutionary tradition. There was a time when Germany produced characters that could match the best men in the revolutions of other countries."

The GDR has its place in this line of tradition. From the very beginning it has understood itself as a state living up to the idea of Thomas Müntzer's that "power shall be given to the common folk". As a man who fought with dedicated self-sacrifice for the goal of building a new society in the interests of the common people, Müntzer's example demonstrates ethi-

cal and moral values that have borne and still bear fruit in creating the foundations of socialism and building and advanced socialist society. Thomas Müntzer is associated with historical experiences and lessons that have inspired the formation of an alliance between the working class and the working peasantry as well as other elements striving for social progress. Müntzer's legacy lives on in socialist society and, as Erich Honecker commented, it is particularly dear to us.

I

Thomas Müntzer lived in the same age, the same geographical and political environment as Martin Luther and, in his earlier years, in similar social conditions. It was a time marked by profound social contradictions which, at the beginning of the 16th century, sharpened and developed into an all-out social crisis to grip the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which was splintered into some 350 territories, feudal domains and imperial towns.

The feudal system still prevailed. The majority of the people were living in villages under feudal relations of production. The nobility ruled the country and its inhabitants, demanded levies and services and caused additional harm by numerous feudal feuds and wars.

The Church, headed by the Roman Pope, was the international power centre of the feudal system. It was the biggest feudal land owner. Many of its high dignitaries wielded political power in the territories and domains. The Popes interfered in the affairs of the Reich and Rome sucked the Reich, its territories and communities dry by extorting all kinds of levies and duties. Above all, the Church dominated all intellectual activity. Being the sole institution to interpret the Di-

vine Will, which in the understanding of that age made it the supreme and absolute authority, the Church determined to the farthest extent the awareness, thinking and social conduct of the people. This power was used to legitimize and stabilize the existing feudal order.

However, these formerly stable structures began to crack. Under the impact of early capitalist developments which had set in at the end of the 15th century tangible changes occurred in the social pyramid of feudal society. New social forces began to emerge that were linked with the bourgeois type of economy: an early trading and manufacturing bourgeoisie and the strata that were to develop into the proletariat. All classes of feudal society went through an unprecedented differentiating process. In particular, the rapidly accelerating polarization between rich and poor superimposed all traditional structures of estate. While merchants, mine owners and the agents who supplied home workers accumulated great wealth, often about half the population of the towns were plebeians, urban poor and beggars. In the villages, too, social structures changed. Those members of the nobility who benefited from economic growth, notably the more powerful princes, were able to strengthen their positions. Some of the lesser gentry were impoverished and tried to compensate their losses by stepping up their exploitation of the peasantry. There was a growing differentiation among the rural population, the mass of the people. While a small group of well-to-do farmers profited from economic development, the middling and minor peasants were exposed to increasing oppression and exploitation. Poverty was spreading noticeably. Feudal oppression and exploitation were exacerbated to an unbearable extent, particularly in the territorially fragmented regions of south-west Germany and in Thuringia.

This resulted in severe social tensions and numerous other

political and social problems. Prominent members of the nobility attempted to adapt the political and administrative structures to the new conditions by way of an imperial reform. Their efforts miscarried because of the different power interests, notably the emperor and various groups of princes. In other advanced European countries, such as France, Britain and Spain, the most urgent problems were solved by strong monarchies. There the kings, supported by urban economic forces, either eliminated the rivalling feudal factions or divested them of power. They established centralized states offering the bourgeoisie relatively broad opportunities to develop and providing a framework for the later emergence of bourgeois nations and the revolutionary elimination of feudalism under more mature conditions. This path of development was blocked in the German territories. There was no strong king and the German monarch was simultaneously the Holy Roman Emperor. In addition, the king was voted into office by the prince electors who had a vested interest in keeping the monarchy weak in order to preserve their own powers. The German kings, or Roman emperors, were primarily concerned with external affairs and left the splintered Reich largely to the rule of the princes and other feudal lords. This explains why the crisis exploded here earlier than elsewhere.

Social and political tensions, discontent and a general atmosphere of crisis were building up, and surfaced in many ways. Numerous towns witnessed violent uprisings. In southwest Germany, peasants and the rural poor allied with the urban poor under the banner of the Bundschuh union, and Württemberg experienced a revolt known as Poor Conrad's Rebellion. The miners in the mountainous regions of Tyrol, the Ore Mountains and the Harz fought for social improvements. Art and literature, under the influence of the Renaissance, and new values derived from humanist ideals demanded

and forged a new world outlook and a new image of humanity, sometimes exposing the situation in society to pungent criticism. The discovery of America and the great geographical discoveries that followed, inventions and new experience for scientists and technologists, with their far-reaching social and philosophical consequences, undermined the old view of the world. In accordance with prevailing religious thinking, prophecies foretold the approaching apocalyptical Last Judgment or nourished hopes for imminent Reformation. There was a common feeling of insecurity which led to exaggerated piety, reflected in pilgrimages, the cult of saints, offerings and similar phenomena, amidst a general mood of doom and forebodings of death.

Criticism was particularly directed against the Papal Church. Because of its central position in society and its dominant role it could not be ignored, whatever solution might be sought to solve the crisis and bring about fundamental social changes. However, all earlier attempts at breaking the temporal power of the Church, eliminating its internal defects and leading it back to its origins encountered a relatively stable Church and were thus thwarted. The protagonists of these changes were burnt as heretics, buried in dungeons, silenced, or integrated. By the beginning of the 16th century, however, the situation for the Church had changed. It slid into a crisis of authority caused by its increasingly obvious defects. The combination of that crisis with the profound crisis in society provided a basis for mass attacks on the Church.

II

The decisive assault came from Martin Luther from the end of 1517 onwards, and he derived strength and support from the quickly developing reformatory movement. He deprived the Roman Church as an institution of many essential dogmatic foundations. His theology, notably his doctrine of faith as sole justification, gave rise to a new understanding of the relationship between Man and God which radically questioned the general legitimacy of the Church as a constitutionalized and hierarchically structured institution. He disputed any right of the Church to establish norms and fetter individual conscience and, instead, saw the community of believers, constituted and defined by the Gospel and the sacraments, as the true Church. He based his views on the Bible and the word of God to which the Scriptures provided a direct key. He made this the sole yardstick against which to measure the legitimacy of conditions in both Church and society. He linked his criticism of the Church and notably the Papacy, which he founded on the Bible, to a multitude of political, social, economic and ethical demands which concerned the interests of broad, even opposing social classes and groups. At first Luther's teachings were an integrating force, uniting under his name a diverse

movement striving for social changes. Its struggle against the Roman Church was soon to assume revolutionary characteristics.

The given social conditions explain why theology played a central role in political, social and religious conflicts and why revolutionary demands were substantiated by religious arguments. This applies to both Müntzer and Luther. Luther led the way. His historic achievement was to initiate the Reformation, the movement against what Friedrich Engels called the "international citadel of the feudal system" and provide its theological and ideological foundations. The Reformation movement was the beginning and also an essential component of the revolution. By fundamentally opposing the economic, political and ideological control which the Papal Church, under Rome's direction, wielded over the Empire, it raised the question of power which is the crucial question in every revolution, calling for a shift in the balance of forces towards the secular masters and the bourgeoisie.

When, in the later course of the revolutionary process, class differences became more articulate within the reformatory movement and an independent and more radical popular movement began to emerge, it was Thomas Müntzer who pressed the movement ahead to its revolutionary consequence. The revolution culminated in the Peasants' War of 1525, which was then also directed against the secular feudal lords and redefined the question of power in the interests of the exploited common people. The peasants were defeated. The timing of the events, at the beginning of the world historic process of transition from feudalism to capitalism, defines the nature of the revolution as bourgeois; since neither the objective nor the subjective conditions had properly matured, it was early bourgeois.

III

Little is known about the early life of Thomas Müntzer. So few references have survived that much of what is said cannot be proven. It has been established from the scanty information about his family and social milieu that he came from Stolberg in the southern foothills of the Harz Mountains. His father presumably belonged to the middle-ranking bourgeoisie, and his parents probably moved from Stolberg to Quedlinburg during his childhood. The society where he spent his youth, in and beneath the Southern Harz, was influenced by the development of early capitalist mining.

Neither the year nor the date of his birth is clear, but by reckoning back from the first known date, his enrolment at the University of Leipzig in 1506, we can set 1489 as a possible year. There is no information about his schooling. It would have been the early humanism flourishing at the University of Leipzig that prompted him to study ancient languages. Müntzer continued his studies in 1512 at the University of Frankfurt an der Oder.

He sat his Master of Arts examination and also acquired the lowest academic rank, the Baccalaureus, in the discipline of Theology, although it is not known from which university.

According to a confession forced out of him later by torture, his studies at Leipzig and Frankfurt had been interspersed by a period working as an assistant teacher, or collaborator, in Aschersleben and Halle where he founded a vaguely defined "alliance" against the Archbishop of Magdeburg. On receiving a prebend in Brunswick in 1514, he was designated priest of the Halberstadt diocese; his ordination must have taken place shortly beforehand. In Brunswick Müntzer established relations with higher-ranking bourgeois circles with early ideas of reform. In 1515 he began his work in a community of secular canonesses in Frose, while offering instruction to the sons of Brunswick burghers.

In 1518 at the latest, and possibly even in the previous year, Müntzer visited Wittenberg, the cradle of the Reformation. He established contacts with Luther, Philipp Melancthon and other members of the reformatory core. During his stay in Wittenberg he was riveted by Luther's Reformation, and it was not long before he was championing it with the constancy so characteristic of him. From the very beginning he seems to have retained some independence from Luther's theological stance, although initially this still left him within the broad current of the anti-Roman movement.

In the spring of 1519 Müntzer helped out as a temporary preacher in Jüterbog. There, at the side of Franz Günther, one of the first disciples and allies of Luther, he came into conflict with the Franciscan monastic order which was campaigning against the Reformation. This was his first recorded act to champion the Reformation. It was in this dispute that the label "Lutheran" was used for the first time by opponents of the Reformation to designate its supporters, and Müntzer was the first person to whom it was applied.

From time to time Müntzer would have attended the Leipzig debates in the summer of 1519, when the orthodox the-

ologians Johann Eck and Andreas Bodenstein, known as Karlstadt, challenged Martin Luther.

At the end of 1519 he was working in the Beuditz Convent. Here he continued his intensive studies of the Church Fathers, German mysticism, and the documents of those councils where abortive attempts to reform the Church had been made in the 15th century. The mystics were a multifaceted intellectual current whose basic principle was the unification of Man with God through prayer, meditation, ascetism and imitation of Christ. They took a critical view of the Church as an institution, and it was above all by studying them that Müntzer found a spiritual ferment to clarify his own stance. He gradually distanced himself from Luther as a teacher and as an individual.

IV

In May 1520 the council of Zwickau appointed Thomas Müntzer to deputize for Johannes Sylvius Egranus, who preached in the spirit of humanist reform, at St Mary's Church in the town. Zwickau had close connections with silver mining in the nearby Ore Mountains, and, due to its thriving, in part early capitalist, cloth trade, was one of the most important towns in the Saxon electorate. There were sharp social differences in the community, and these exerted increasing influence on the course of the Reformation in Zwickau. Müntzer stayed there for almost a year. It was to be a decisive episode in his development.

After Egranus had returned to his domain in autumn 1520, Müntzer moved to St Catherine's Church. His new social environment was dominated by the masters and journeymen of the cloth trade. Some had formed a grouping around the journeyman Nikolaus Storch which claimed to ascertain the will of God by interpreting dreams and parts of the Bible independently. Müntzer won supporters from their ranks in the dispute which was breaking out between him and Egranus over the substance of the Reformation.

Their dispute centred on theological questions, but was set

against the background of the social differences between Müntzer's followers and the well-to-do bourgeoisie which rallied around Egranus. Johann Agricola of Wittenberg, no doubt with Luther's knowledge, appealed to Müntzer to moderate his tone. This indicates that there were differences between his way of working and that of the Wittenberg Reformer. Zwickau council, concerned about order in the town, expelled Müntzer on 16 April 1521, at the same time as Luther was refusing to recant at the Diet of Worms, as the Emperor had demanded. In order to keep Müntzer in the town, his followers among the journeymen were preparing an uprising without his knowledge. The council forestalled it and had several journeymen thrown into gaol.

It was now becoming more apparent that Müntzer also differed from Luther in his theology, which was gradually taking shape. The first signs of this were his growing spiritualism and a sense of prophetic mission. These were theological views and attitudes which were widespread in the early Reformation movement, and from which Luther was beginning to disassociate himself. Spiritualism taught the primacy of the Holy Spirit in God's earthly dispositions and in interpretation of the Bible. In Müntzer's case spiritualism implied above all an idea of living divine revelation: it was not only the Bible that contained the word of God; God revealed himself independently of all Scriptures. Müntzer believed that He spoke directly to the people and that He revealed himself by touching their hearts, through an inner voice, in dreams and visions. This was of practical political and social significance to the ideological arguments raging at the time of the Reformation. It enabled the popular masses to legitimize their hopes, desires, needs and demands by citing the will of God against the rulers and also against the Wittenberg University scholars and their interpretation of the Bible. In this way it was possi-

ble to articulate the interests of the people in theological terms.

In developing his spiritualist ideas Müntzer gradually arrived at the conviction that the simple folk would hear the voice of God sooner and more clearly than the rich and powerful. He believed that God had chosen them to rid the world of its unjust order by imitating Christ who suffered and died on the Cross and by renouncing all worldly possessions and suppressing all animal passions. Müntzer wanted a complete transformation, bringing about the direct rule of God and establishing Christian equality amongst all Men, and this on Earth. Thus he broke through the barriers of spiritualism, which could mislead people into having little respect for "carnal" and worldly concerns and envisaging the kingdom of God as purely spiritual.

Inspired by the prophets of the Old Testament, Thomas Müntzer considered himself to be a "servant of the Lord", a prophet proclaiming the will of God, and saw his followers as "soldiers of God" and in this respect similar to the Bohemian Taborites of the 15th-century Hussite revolutionary movement. And at first, he did expect the successors of the Hussites in Bohemia to establish the "new apostolic church". Thus after his dismissal in Zwickau he turned his attention towards Bohemia.

He was welcomed in Prague as a "Lutheran", particularly by the followers of Hus. He preached to the people in several places, even in the street, but soon met with the resistance of orthodox and conservative Hussite circles. It seems that he was taken into custody for a short time and had to leave Prague before the end of 1521.

It was in Prague that he wrote the "Prague Manifesto", the most important testimony to his theological development between his time in Zwickau and his later work in Allstedt. In

this text, of which two German, one Latin and one Czech version have survived, Müntzer denounced in yet stronger terms the inability of the clergy, monks and scholars to convey the living word of God. The spiritualist elements developed into hard-hitting polemics against those who prayed to a mute God exclusively bound to the Holy Scriptures and instructed their flock in a faith without substance. Müntzer allotted a particular role to the poor people who were thirsting for redemption, who were already portrayed in this document as an instrument chosen by God to destroy the power of the godless. "But I do not doubt the people", he wrote in the extended German version of the Manifesto.

But as yet Müntzer had not criticized Luther directly. This did not happen until March 1522 in a letter he wrote to Melancthon after his return from Bohemia. Aware of the sermon Luther gave upon his return from the Wartburg, in which the Reformer began to exert a brake on the movement, Müntzer again acknowledged his respect for him but did refer to distinct differences of opinion.

The growing distance between him and Luther had objective causes. As broader and broader strata of the population were drawn into the conflicts and moved towards practical implementation of the Reformation, so they introduced their own ideas and aims into the movement. It was no longer merely a matter of the struggle against Papal rule, of change within the Church or the dissemination of God's word. There were also the questions of sharing power among broader strata of the population in the towns and countryside, of abolishing usurious interest and tithes, of real social improvements and of restricting the rights of the overlords. Groups who all considered themselves supporters of the Reformation and cited the word of God as their authority frequently opposed one another. The arguments of the Reformation served

conflicting class forces and interests. This was the social basis which led to criticism that the Lutheran Reformation was half-hearted since it was beginning to become increasingly oriented to the interests of princes and governing authorities in the towns.

Information about Müntzer's work after his return from Bohemia is fragmentary. It is known that he stayed in Erfurt from time to time and temporarily in the imperial town of Nordhausen, and that he preached in Stolberg and took part in colloquies in Wittenberg and Weimar. He travelled to southern Germany at some point between these events. At the end of the year 1522 he was curate in Glauchau near Halle. Driven from here and in economic distress, he was taken on as a preacher in Allstedt.

V

At the end of March 1523 Müntzer was made preacher of St John's Church in the small farming town of Allstedt, a seat of Saxon administration, and he thus had a base from which to work for one year and four months. Here he elaborated his teachings further, disseminated them in printed form and began to turn his views into reality. After Easter 1523 he married the former nun Otilie von Gersen and set up home.

Müntzer began his work by reforming the Church service. On 5 April, his first documented public appearance in Allstedt, he held Mass in German so as to help the people to find the true light. He justified the use of the German language by saying that everyone should know what he believes. Thus reform of the religious service was an important element in his Reformation. As the "German Church Office" and the "German Protestant Mass" had been printed with prefaces and circulated, they could also be used in other places.

Müntzer's sermons met with an enthusiastic response beyond the town walls of Allstedt, too. An increasing number of believers from the environs streamed into the town for the services. The town was, however, surrounded by orthodox territories and Count Ernst von Mansfeld forbade his subjects

to attend Müntzer's sermons. When the Count demanded of Elector Frederick the Wise that Müntzer be taken prisoner, the latter consulted his sovereign on 4 October 1523. He declared his readiness to defend his teachings publicly but, at the same time, made it known that the sword would be taken from the princes if they did not use it to defend the pious. This was the first definite indication that Müntzer attributed to the persecuted and tyrannized underlings the right to resist godless authorities.

A public hearing never came about but it would have been in this connection that his first writings came into being. In his "Protestation or Defence of Thomas Müntzer of Stolberg in the Harz, Pastor of Allstedt, Regarding his Teachings and the Beginning of the True Christian Faith and Baptism" he demanded that the damage resulting from the decline of the Church since the time of the apostles be recognized, that the will of God be studied from his living word and the path to true faith be sought. In his text "Of Written Faith" he set out his understanding of his creed in detail. He believed that in order to attain true faith Man had to bear the Cross and suffer like Christ and to cast off all "bestial" things. This was the only way that people could be prepared for "the change of the world".

Conflict with the feudal authorities came to a head when, on 24 March 1524, Mallerbach pilgrimage chapel near to Allstedt was set on fire and the Weimar court demanded that the culprits be punished. In the face of increasing reprisals the alarm was sounded and on 13 June in Allstedt the citizens assembled and armed themselves. It emerged on this occasion that Müntzer had established the Allstedt alliance, a secret organization for the protection of the Gospel, which now entered the public arena and was expanded. There is evidence that the alliance also had members from outside the town.

Müntzer took advantage of the sojourn of Duke Johann and his entourage at Allstedt Castle to give a sermon, on 13 July, which was printed soon afterwards under the title of "Interpretation of the Other Difference of the Prophet Daniel".

The Book of Daniel is the oldest apocalyptic book in the Bible, the revelation of the Last Judgement. According to apocalyptic ideas the view that all empires, past and present, embody all that is evil goes hand in hand with the expectations that an eternal kingdom of God will dawn to redeem the righteous and annihilate the wicked. But God alone determines and effectuates the birth of the new kingdom. He reveals his plans at most in dreams and visions. Apocalyptic ideas essentially reflected the ideas of those in need or distress who saw no hope of improvement and who awaited the coming of a kingdom of divine justice and God's punishment of the oppressors.

The Princes' Sermon, as it was known, was first and foremost aimed at winning the Saxon sovereigns over to Müntzer's ideas of the Reformation. In his interpretation of the second chapter in the Book of Daniel, Müntzer illustrated for them how the spirit of Christ had been scorned since the fall of the apostolic church and that this was now happening with the Lutherans. Müntzer called upon the princes to take the matter of the Reformation in hand and use the sword to punish the wicked who flouted the Gospel. If they failed to fulfil this task they would be divested of power.

The ideas of the apocalypse now began to have more and more influence on Müntzer. As he developed them he moved beyond the usual passive attitude of expectation, which placed all its hopes in godly intervention. Müntzer looked instead towards active intervention by the chosen to bring down the godless; his interpretation of the apocalypse was revolutionary.

As more and more of the persecuted arrived in Allstedt and the danger arose that the neighbouring lords might hunt them out with force, Müntzer called upon the people, in his sermon of 24 July 1524, to unite. Similar "defensive" alliances as in Allstedt were to be established elsewhere. Luther now ended his silence and demanded in his "Letter to the Princes of Saxony" that action be taken against this Satan of Allstedt who was bent on revolt. Nevertheless, Müntzer still tried to justify himself before the authorities. It was probably for this purpose that he drafted his "Testimony on the First Chapter of the Gospel according to St Luke", an interpretation in which Müntzer once again summarized his understanding of faith but, at the same time, condemned the rule of the godless saying one couldn't serve both God and riches.

On 31 July and 1 August 1524 Müntzer and the Allstedt authorities had to answer to the Weimar court for the burning of the chapel and for the Alliance. On 3 August Allstedt Castle ordered Müntzer to dissolve the Allstedt Alliance and dismiss his printer. Left in the lurch by the council and with little room for manoeuvre, he left the town secretly on the evening of 7 August. He now knew from experience that he could not rely on the authorities.

VI

The period following the Diet of Worms in 1521 to the outbreak of the Peasants' War in the summer of 1524 was generally marked by a differentiation in the ideological views of the Reformation and in the political action of those class forces involved in the Reformation movement. Thus other figures and currents with more radical views than Luther and wanting to advance the movement entered the scene alongside Müntzer.

In Thuringia a group formed around Andreas Bodenstein or Karlstadt, as he was known. He had been driven out of Wittenberg by Luther in 1522. A circle of reform-minded people gathered around him in Orlamünde-Jena. The group opposed the Wittenberg Reformation and the rigour of its reforming measures went beyond that of Luther. The group can be seen as the core of a radical bourgeois current in the Reformation. Müntzer saw it as a natural ally, especially as Luther was fighting both Karlstadt and Müntzer, whom he called "zealots".

From winter 1522 until the summer of 1524 correspondence passed between Müntzer and Karlstadt and the communities of Allstedt and Orlamünde, and personal meetings

presumably also took place. In their ideas of the Reformation both Müntzer and Karlstadt stressed mystical concepts and addressed the simple folk as the pillar of the Reformation. But Karlstadt and his circle did not go as far as Müntzer in their criticism of the authorities and, in particular, in recognizing the right to resist them. When Müntzer and the Allstedt people made a formal offer of alliance to the Orlamünde community it was categorically rejected.

Reforming currents also developed in the southern cities of the German empire and in Switzerland which were at odds with Luther on theological issues (eucharistic controversy) and which the latter lumped together with Müntzer and Karlstadt. They were more committed to humanist ideas and concentrated on the needs of the upper urban strata. To this extent they did, despite his polemics, represent the same type of pro-authorities Reformation as Luther and they soon came into conflict with demands for reform by the poorer strata in their towns and by the peasants from surrounding areas. Thus there were fundamental differences between them and Müntzer in terms of both theology and its social relevance. Nevertheless, Müntzer did win sympathizers in this region. A group around Konrad Grebel of Zurich, who was later to become an Anabaptist leader, declared its support for some of Müntzer's fundamental theological views, though not for the use of force against tyrannical authorities, and called itself "the seven new young Müntzers".

VII

At the time when Müntzer left Allstedt the situation prevailing throughout the Empire was tense: radical forces were pushing for vigorous continuation of the Reformation, moderates were seeking to stabilize what had been achieved, and Catholic princes were preparing to strike back. In the rural southwest, where the feudal oppression of peasants was particularly severe, unrest was growing. The uprising in the rural county of Stühlingen in June 1524 marked the beginning of the Peasants' War.

The class struggles of the early bourgeois revolution culminated in the German Peasants' War, the most powerful anti-feudal mass movement. In early 1525 roughly 200,000 insurgents bore arms. Fortresses, castles and monasteries were stormed. In several areas the rule of the feudal powers was temporarily interrupted.

The Reformation had paved the way for the Peasants' War by providing the people's movement with a general spiritual foundation and ideological legitimacy through its interpretation of the Gospel. The struggle to implement "divine justice" was being waged everywhere. At the same time, the reformatory movement had questioned the feudal Church's material

foundations, its claim to political power and its role as spiritual guide, and had thus lent the anti-feudal movement enormous impetus. Finally, economic, social, legal and political demands were derived from this new understanding of the Gospel, which had an immense impact on society and pressed towards its fundamental transformation.

The German Peasants' War was one of the greatest class battles to liberate the exploited and oppressed in German history. The peasant strata were the pillars of the War and were, as far as their interests concurred, supported by some strata in the towns and by miners. In the summer of 1524 the wave of uprisings began to spread through the southwest of the Empire, then in the spring of 1525 to larger areas from the Alps to Franconia, from Alsace to the Thuringian Forest. The insurgents formed armed troops which had military structures. They founded "Christian unifications", the embryonic forms of new instruments of power to administer the regions in which they had temporarily gained power. The Peasants' War was the first attempt by the German people to revolutionize society by broad, organized insurrection. It provided an opportunity to weaken the feudal system decisively. From mid-August 1524 Müntzer lived in the free imperial city of Mühlhausen. The Lutheran message had found its way into the town, the bourgeois opposition had gained an influence on urban politics, and the former monk Heinrich Pfeiffer had spurred criticism of the clergy. It seems as if Müntzer started to reform the religious service here, too. But it was not long before this was overshadowed by other events. On 19 September 1524 a crowd gathered. Müntzer and Pfeiffer were involved in drawing up eleven articles summarizing a list of demands. They included the establishment of a new council which was to ensure the administration of justice founded on the Gospel. In fact, the Gospel was to provide the only guid-

ing principle for the life of the community. It seems that the "Eternal Covenant of God" arose out of this situation. This was a fighting association with a military structure which chose the rainbow flag as its banner. Over 200 people had their names written on the membership list, but they were not able to break the rule of the governing council. On 26 September the council voted to expel Müntzer and Pfeiffer with the help of a contingent of armed peasants from council villages. On 27 September both Müntzer and Pfeiffer had to leave Mühlhausen.

Müntzer probably intended to reply at last to the reproaches Luther had made in the "Letter to the Princes of Saxony". As it was now impossible for him to have his writings printed in the Electorate of Saxony, he took advantage of contacts with Hans Hut, one of the members of the Covenant from Bibra. Hut arranged the printing of the "Precise Exposure of False Belief" in Nuremberg, while an unknown person brought the "Well-Grounded Defence and Reply to the Godless, Easy-Living Flesh of Wittenberg" to print. Müntzer himself stayed in Nuremberg for a short time in autumn, but did not make a public appearance.

The "Precise Exposure" was a sharper version of the Allstedt "Testimony", Müntzer now placed his hopes in the people alone. He saw the removal of material burdens as being essential in preparing their way towards true faith. Thus his teaching became more oriented towards social issues. The "Well-Grounded Defence" concentrated on the disagreement with Luther: Müntzer criticized above all Luther's apologetics and rejected the accusation that he, Müntzer, wanted to stir up unrest. He said the princes and lords had only themselves to blame for the uprising:

"The most abominable of all the ills on Earth is that no-one wants to concern themselves with the poverty of the needy.

The great do as they wish ... Behold and you will see that our lords and princes breed usury, theft and robbery, they take all creatures to be their property. The fish in the water, the birds in the sky, the vegetation on the land all have to be theirs ... Over and above all this they have God's commandment preached to the poor, saying: God has commanded that thou shalt not steal ... Thus, when he (the poor man) takes even the slightest thing he has to hang ... It is the lords themselves which make the poor man their enemy. They do not want to do away with the cause of the insurgence, how long can that continue? If saying this makes me an insurgent, then so be it!"

Müntzer moved on from Nuremberg to Basel and then the Black Forest. After visiting the Reformer Johannes Oekolampad and the humanist Ulrich Hugwald his path led him to the insurgent peasants. He stayed in the village of Griessen and visited other places from there. Previously he had gained most of his experience of social politics from the towns. He had devoted himself to the concerns of the burghers and increasingly to those of the poor people in towns and suburbs. The peasants were owners; they had helped to have him expelled from Mühlhausen. And now for the first time he was confronted with the insurgent peasants face to face. After the uprising began in Stühlingen, it had spread to Hegau and Klettgau. Müntzer confessed later that he had preached to the peasants here and dictated articles on how to govern, something which is possibly connected with constitutional concepts widespread in the Black Forest.

Müntzer returned to Mühlhausen at the end of February 1525. In the meantime, the situation here had changed fundamentally. Pfeiffer had returned to the town on 13 December 1524 and since then government of the town had been taken over to all practical intents by the bourgeois opposition. On

28 February 1525 Müntzer was appointed priest by three boroughs of the town, and preached to the congregation of St Mary's, the largest church in Mühlhausen.

On 16 March, at an assembly of citizens, Müntzer called for a new Council to be elected. This occurred by simple majority the next day.

The "Eternal Council" remained in office from 17 March to 28 May 1525. It was the result of a compromise between the various factions within the bourgeois opposition. The measures it introduced proved to be a tentative effort to alter the balance of power.

By now Müntzer had also won supporters in other Thuringian regions, who played an active part at the start of the peasant insurgence in the province of Thuringia. The opposition rose against the council in Langensalza and a contingent from Mühlhausen moved in on 26 April 1525. Müntzer supported the action, attempting in the meantime to strengthen his support in Mühlhausen and mobilize the members of the Allstedt alliance. In a rousing circular letter of 26 or 27 April he called upon them to bring down the tyrants: "It is not possible for you to be free of human fear as long as they live. We cannot talk to you about God as long as they govern over you. Set to it while there is still time. God leads the way, follow Him!"

On 28 April, when the expedition had returned from Langensalza, the people of Mühlhausen built a camp near Görmar and reinforced their military structure. Müntzer agreed to help out Nordhausen and Frankenhausen at their request, but first the troop marched on Eichsfeld. Nevertheless, Müntzer was at pains to keep his promise when moderate forces gained the upper hand within the camp near Frankenhausen. Meanwhile the resolute enemy of the Reformation and of the Peasants' War, Duke Georg of Saxony, was planning to crush the Thuringian insurgence. The troops of the Hessian Land-

grave, who sympathized with the Reformation, and of the Dukes of Brunswick were also advancing.

On 9 May Müntzer appealed to the community of Mühlhausen to support Frankenhäusen. On 10 or 11 May he moved out of the town with 300 men, arriving in the Frankenhäusen camp on 11 May. He sent letters to counts Albrecht and Ernst von Mansfeld in which he called upon them to desist from their tyranny. He tried to obtain reinforcements by sending other letters, but these requests made to a number of towns and villages drew no response.

Müntzer took advantage of the sermons he held in the camp to mobilize the people for the struggle against the godless authorities. At this moment his thoughts revolved around the use of power by the people as the instrument for the implementation of God's will. He had already expressed the view, in his "Well-Grounded Defence", that "a united community has the power of the sword". He now proclaimed, referring to the Old Testament Prophet Daniel, "that power shall be given to the common folk".

On the morning of 14 May the Hessian troops launched their first attack on Frankenhäusen, which was repulsed. The insurgents then erected a barricade of wagons on the Hausberg, later called the Schlachtberg (Mount Battle). Philipp von Hessen called on them to lay down their weapons and hand over Müntzer. It is possible that a limited ceasefire was agreed on the morning of 15 May. Meanwhile, the adversaries rallied their troops and began to fire on the barricade. When the princes' cavalry forced their way in, most of the insurgents fled towards the nearby town for protection but were slaughtered on the way there. Müntzer was tracked down in a house and taken prisoner.

On the very same day Müntzer was delivered to Ernst von Mansfeld, his bitter enemy, who took him to Heldrungen Cas-

tle, where he was interrogated and tortured. When asked what his objectives had been, Müntzer declared: "He had made the unrest so that Christendom might be equal and the princes and lords who would not abide by the Gospel be driven out and beaten to death."

On 19 May the allied princes advanced on Mühlhausen, on 25 May the keys of the town were surrendered. On 27 May, in the camp of the victorious princes between Mühlhausen and Görmar, Thomas Müntzer and Hans Pfeiffer were beheaded. Their bodies were displayed on the spit as a warning to all and sundry.

VIII

It is Thomas Müntzer's historic achievement that he developed – under the conditions of the incipient transition from feudalism to capitalism – a theology of revolution which reflected the aspirations of the exploited and oppressed and, in turn, propelled the differentiation and radicalization process of the reformational movement to its most revolutionary consequences.

His thinking always centred on cognition of the will of God in order to show the people the way to the true faith. This idea derived depth and concrete social contours from Müntzer's personal experience in his active campaign to implement the Reformation. This prompted him to identify all those as "godless" who denied the people access to the Gospel and, as exploiters, appropriated the fruit of human labour and deprived the oppressed of food, and that meant first and foremost the feudal overlords. His experience encouraged him to see the poor and socially deprived in the towns and villages as the agents of Reformation, chosen to accomplish the necessary radical transformations, even if this implied taking arms against the feudal tyrants. His views about the path, the means and the ultimate objective of popular struggle were increasingly dominated by Old and New Testament images of

Apocalypse, the end of the world when God will pass Judgment on the godless. His ideology pointed beyond his age, for which bourgeois capitalism was still a progressive future society. It negated any class order on principle, anticipating a still far distant future when the elimination of class rule would become the historic mission of the working class.

Although Müntzer's aim, a realm of divine justice, could be no more than an utopian dream, his efforts to activate broad sections of society against feudal rule responded to the demands of the early bourgeois revolution, and he provided this struggle with the "divine" legitimation it needed at the time. Without seeing himself as the representative of any particular social class or stratum, Müntzer recognized at the climax of the class conflict that the exploited and oppressed people were the only social force able to overthrow the feudal powers and thus execute God's will. His concept was to reinstate the divine order which had, in his view, existed in the early Church before the decay of Christendom had begun. Given the social reality of his time, however, this was a radical challenge to the feudal system.

Thomas Müntzer continued a tradition, which had already existed among the exploited and oppressed for almost two thousand years, of contrasting a life in exploitation and misery, oppression, slavery and subjection with a vision of a new heaven and a new earthly life, a new realm of justice and equality for all children of the Lord. This idea had its roots in the prophecies of the Old Testament, the apocalyptic visions of Judaism and early Christianity and appeared in different forms in the course of changing historical situations. In the Middle Ages it had influenced the Franciscan movement as well as the Cathars, Waldenses and other heretical sects, and motivated the 15th-century Bohemian Taborites in their committed struggle.

It was with and through Thomas Müntzer that this hope of humankind, for the first time ever, became a ferment for bourgeois revolution. However, in the early bourgeois revolution none of the propertied classes and social strata, neither burghers nor peasants, neither the lesser gentry nor the high nobility, was objectively able or subjectively willing to acknowledge this idea. It was only from the plebeian, proto-proletarian sections of the urban population and the rural poor that Thomas Müntzer drew any noteworthy response and a determined following. As his supporters were recruited from sections living beneath and outside the established estates and official society, Müntzer's ideas also extended beyond the comprehension, tolerance and feasibility of bourgeois revolutions. That is why they could only make a temporary impact on the extreme left wing in the early bourgeois revolution. Their historical function was to reach for the impossible in order to push the feasible a little further.

The vision of liberation nourished by the exploited and oppressed in the subsequent cycle of bourgeois revolutions never managed to outgrow this function, nor could it leap the social barrier which divides those who lack property and privilege from the burghers and owners of the means of production: the Levellers, Diggers and Quintomonarchists in the English revolution of the 17th century and Babeuf, the Enragés and Jacques Roux in the French Revolution in the late 18th century.

Even in our day, Müntzer's fundamental vision of humankind is reborn and revitalized in new form wherever people deprived of their rights rise against exploitation and oppression. In this sense, Thomas Müntzer, who fought his fight in the 16th century, is the symbol of a human tradition which has accompanied and propelled the course of history from early class societies until the struggles of our time.

IX

Müntzer made an impact which has resounded far beyond his time into our own. Müntzer has been the litmus paper of opinion. He became the very symbol of a revolutionary, and the way he is seen largely depends on one's position towards revolution. Thus the history of Müntzer's work has assumed an importance of its own. It has been part of the history of struggle for social progress.

From the 16th to the 18th centuries, the Müntzer tradition was mainly preserved in the aspirations, memories and hopes of the masses, although his ideas also retained some direct influence through the activities of some of his followers after the peasants' revolt was defeated. But the social environment had undergone profound changes. The feudal lords, mainly the big princes, were able to consolidate their power. Although early capitalism prospered for some time, there was a partial stabilization of feudal relations. Reformation of either the Lutheran or the South German and Swiss type began to shore up rule by the princes and in the towns, the bourgeois upper classes. It lost its originally revolutionary potential.

Henceforth, anybody who confessed support for the cause of the insurgents or loyalty to Thomas Müntzer and any other

champions of more radical Reformation currents labelled "zealots" and "spiritualists" and outlawed as rebels, was running a deadly risk and inviting merciless persecution by the authorities. Neither was there any longer a chance of meeting with the response and solidarity of larger sections of society. The revolutionary intellectual potential split and adapted to the new conditions in society. However, Müntzer's ideas were fostered by Anabaptists and Spiritualists like Hans Hut, Hans Römer and, to a certain extent, Melchior Rinck and Hans Denck. It is difficult to say how far Müntzer's ideas influenced others or were disseminated by them, for instance Konrad Grebel and his circle, possibly Balthasar Hubmaier and the Anabaptists of Münster. Usually it was Müntzer's mystic, spiritualist and sometimes apocalyptic views that were passed on; mostly, however, stripped of that revolutionary interpretation which called for active struggle against the ruling institutions. It was only in the Theocracy of Münster in 1534/35 that the anti-feudal movement, although in a local framework, in a modified form and under different conditions, reached another peak.

In 1531 the important historian and philosopher Sebastian Franck, a late protagonist of the radical wing in the early bourgeois revolution, tried for the first time to offer a positive assessment of Thomas Müntzer and his work. Some Anabaptist chronicles show a similar trend.

Müntzer's ideas also indirectly influenced other progressive philosophical movements of that time such as Pansophy, Rosicrucianism, the Weigelians, the followers of Jakob Böhme, and others in several European countries. They opposed the prevailing situation in society and in the Church, demanding the establishment of a new world order, a realm of equality and justice on earth.

The ruling circles, including those who supported Reforma-

tion of the Lutheran, South German, and Swiss type, had been shocked by Müntzer. They either tried to pass over him in silence or, if they did not succeed, they and their ideologists tried to distort his ideas and activities by a web of lies, imputations, concoctions, simplifications and misrepresentations, borne out by the virtual flood of pamphlets directed against him. These writings attacked all views diverging from the official teaching and cast suspicion on those who held them of spreading Müntzer's ideas of insurrection. At the same time, the reminder that the popular uprising had been defeated and Müntzer mercilessly punished was meant to paralyze all revolutionary energies.

The Roman Catholics generally viewed Müntzer as the product and manifestation of Lutheran spirit. For them, Luther was the instigator of all evil, and Thomas Müntzer was his docile disciple. Like Müntzer, all other radicals were equally referred to as descendants of Luther.

Luther, for his part, was the more eager to draw a distinguishing line between himself and Müntzer. The legend which he and his followers created about Müntzer was an important instrument of ideological oppression to hold down basic opposition to the state and power of the princes, ideological suppression of the revolutionary popular movement. In the circle around Philipp Melancthon, Thomas Müntzer was deprecatingly declared the founder of the movement of the Anabaptists, a view accepted for centuries to come.

After the Theocracy of Münster, Thomas Müntzer, the events in Münster and the Anabaptist movement were pictured as implicitly belonging together and posing a dangerous threat against the given order. The polemic against the revolution in the Netherlands from 1566 and 1609, the next stage in the cycle of bourgeois revolutions, established even closer links between the Anabaptists and all insurrectionist and re-

bellious movements. The Calvinists in the Netherlands, too, fell back on the arguments used by Luther's followers in Wittenberg against Müntzer in their dispute against the Anabaptists, the Arminians and other dissident movements.

Far into the age of Enlightenment, the ideological struggle was waged under the banner of religion. Again and again the representatives of social progress were accused of being followers of Müntzer who wanted to practise his ideas. But even enlightened literature often condemned Müntzer and the Peasants' War, since many champions of the Enlightenment rejected rebellion as a senseless act and a violation of reason.

It is the historical merit of Gottfried Arnold, a representative of the early German Enlightenment and a radical Pietist, that in his "Ecclesiastic and Heretic History" (1699/1700) he departed from the picture of Müntzer painted by Luther. Arnold thus prompted the publication of writings by Müntzer which then even caused orthodox thinkers to edit some of his works. As a result, Müntzer's work was seen by some as a serious subject within the history of Reformation. Arnold paid tribute to Müntzer's theological thinking and stressed its origins in the ideas of the younger Luther, with whom he fully sympathized.

Arnold's new representation of Müntzer provoked numerous reactionary publications, their main aim being the complete negation of any connection between Luther and Müntzer. The intellectual movement of opposition of that time, which was partly based inside the Church itself – and which rejected bibliolatry and the administration of baptism in infancy, disregarded sermons, disdained the denominational and praised the invisible Church, emphasized the importance of lay priesthood, rejected the practices of confession and communion, etc. – was defamed as being in line with Münt-

zer's thinking. Representatives of this oppositional movement included Christian Hoburg, Paul Felgenhauer, Joachim Betke and Quirinus Kuhlmann. This growth, during the Thirty Years' War, of oppositional "sects" also influenced the Brownists and Diggers in the bourgeois revolution in England from 1640 to 1649 and was later reflected in the various manifestations of Pietism in Germany and the Netherlands.

X

The cycle of bourgeois revolutions, as a chapter in world history, culminated in the French Revolution from 1789 to 1795. Led by changing bourgeois and petty bourgeois factions, the popular masses radically swept away the power of the nobility. The ideological justification for the struggle waged by the revolutionaries under the intellectual influence of the Enlightenment were the *jus naturale* principles of liberty and equality. For the first time, they did not primarily invoke religion to legitimize their anti-feudal class interests. The French Revolution ushered in a new epoch marked by the final collapse of feudalism and irreversible advance towards establishment of the bourgeois, capitalist system on the European and on other continents. Revolutionary bourgeois progress stimulated people to reassess history, which also meant reconsidering the legacy of the early bourgeois revolution in Germany, including Thomas Müntzer.

Between 1789 and 1830, it was mainly German bourgeois intellectuals who made it their task to reassess their heritage along these lines, protagonists of Enlightenment who advocated liberalization and secularization for Germany, too. They recognized the Revolution in France as the highlight, and the

simultaneous unrest among peasants, petty bourgeois and early proletarian classes in Germany as a reflection of that great struggle for bourgeois liberty which began with the Reformation and the Peasants' War. However, under the social conditions prevailing in Germany, immature for a bourgeois democratic revolution, they only called for liberal reforms to be enacted by the enlightened nobility. The very moment that political differentiation began to mark the class struggles in France and the Jacobins began defending revolutionary democracy against both the counter-revolution and the liberal moderates, the majority of German intellectuals shuddered away from the Revolution. They defamed the Jacobinic dictatorship which led the revolution to victory as "detestable mobocracy" and used the history of the German Peasants' War as a political warning. Thomas Müntzer, while no longer exactly defamed as the instrument of evil, was now presented as an example of "raging fanaticism" whose ideas of equality, common property and government by the poor not only threatened the privileged nobility but also bourgeois property. This tone also influenced Georg Theodor Strobel, who nevertheless deserves credit for penning the first scholarly account of Thomas Müntzer's life, works and teachings, which was published in 1795.

The small group of Jacobin supporters in Germany took a different position: they continued the tradition of revolutionary democracy and even felt a subjective bond with the Peasants' War, which they commemorated as being within the history of their struggle, without, however, acknowledging Thomas Müntzer as ideological leader. They called for "liberty, equality and fraternity" and wanted to arm the people and establish a republic, but they lacked broad popular support. After the national war of independence in 1813/14, their liberal and republican ideas lived

on in the radical wing of the German students' associations.

Heinrich Heine was the first to free Müntzer from the verdict imposed upon him by reactionary nobles and bourgeois liberals and to identify himself as a partisan of Müntzer's ideas. Under the impact of the revolution of July 1830 in Paris he praised the rebels of the Peasants' War who "so truly and sincerely ... understood equality" and resolutely condemned the German princes who had massacred thousands of peasants and plebeians. Referring to the preacher as one of the "most heroic and unfortunate sons of the German fatherland", the poet saw in Müntzer a revolutionary whose ideas of social equality were "premature". Heine interpreted the German Peasants' War of 1525, the English Revolution of 1642 and the French Jacobin Club of 1793 as milestones in the ascendant line of revolutionary democracy. He held the view that the time had now come to accomplish the political and social emancipation of the people as the ultimate goal of all struggles for freedom and equality. This was a subjective reflection of the fact that, from 1830, conditions in Germany too, were maturing for a bourgeois and democratic revolution, but that, at the same time, the historically new contradiction between bourgeoisie and proletariat was beginning to emerge in revolutionary and democratic thinking. Another figure, apart from Heine, who referred to the legacy of the Peasants' War in propagating the coming revolution was Ludwig Börne.

It was only at this point that Müntzer and the Peasants' War began to enjoy a clearly positive assessment, with ongoing discussion involving the critics of Müntzer in both the reactionary camp and among moderate liberals. A first highlight in that discussion was the work of Wilhelm Zimmermann, a pastor and important historian who dealt with the Peasants' War on a bourgeois and democratic platform. His "General History

of the Great Peasants' War" was published in three volumes between 1841 and 1843. Although still based on rather limited sources, the book was the first to deal in such depth with the revolutionary legacy of the events of 1525 and Thomas Müntzer, and to describe them in such a convincing and dramatic fashion. Zimmermann's work, embedded in the intellectual run-up to the revolution of 1848/49, remains the most comprehensive and thorough all-round account of the Peasants' War.

XI

When the working class entered the scene of history, new life was also breathed into the traditions of the early bourgeois revolution and notably of its culmination, the Peasants' War. As the working class grew more aware of its own historical context, thanks to its most advanced representatives and ideologists, so a consciousness dawned that it was continuing a revolutionary class struggle that linked it with the cause of the peasants and plebeians of 1525.

Even in the early years of the working-class movement, reference to the revolutionary traditions of the Peasants' War formed a major element in developing proletarian self-consciousness. The revolutionary battle cry against exploitation and oppression contained in the first programmatic document of German workers, entitled "Die Menschheit wie sie ist und wie sie sein sollte" (Humanity as it is and as it should be) and drawn up by Wilhelm Weitling on behalf of the League of the Just, also drew authority from a reference to the fight of the rebellious peasants and the activities of Thomas Müntzer.

Marx and Engels, who rated Weitling's work highly, describing it as "the German workers' unequalled and brilliant début in literature", built upon this concept of tradition. Back

in 1844, while scientific socialism was being elaborated, Karl Marx arrived at the conclusion in his introduction to the "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law" that the Peasants' War was "the most radical fact of German history", because it had been Man's most radical attempt to emancipate himself. In 1845, Engels called Müntzer a real democrat in "The State of Germany". The perception of the classical writers of Marxism were significantly enriched by the course and the results of the 1848-49 revolution, which also threw more light on the teachings of 1525.

The more profound studies which the founders of the scientific world outlook of the working class devoted to this revolutionary phase in German history found their most striking expression in Friedrich Engels' work "The Peasant War in Germany" in the summer of 1850. Basing himself on Wilhelm Zimmermann's work, Engels for the first time applied the method of historical materialism to an older theme in German history and created a lasting foundation for the Marxist view of the Peasants' War and the "plebeian revolutionary" Thomas Müntzer.

The impact of the revolutionary heritage of Thomas Müntzer entered a new, supremely important, era through Marx's and Engels' writings and studies and as the traditions of the Peasants' War rebels were taken up by the revolutionary German working-class movement.

Analyses comparing the experience gained from the 1517-25 revolution and the 1848-49 revolution helped to demonstrate more graphically that an alliance between the working class and the peasantry was both necessary and possible. In subsequent decades, Marx and Engels continued to draw on the early bourgeois revolution, particularly in elaborating their perceptions of alliance policy, but also in formulating their overall historical and political way of thinking. Friedrich

Engels expressed the intention on several occasions of rewriting his work so that the Peasants' War would clearly be shown as the pivotal point in German history as a whole. But he did not live to implement this project.

In 19th-century German literature, efforts to portray Thomas Müntzer's personality focussed on the role he played in the German Peasants' War, and this became a battlefield of ideologies and views of history. In the eyes of progressive writers, choosing Müntzer as a hero of their works was a chance to present human greatness in revolutionary struggles and to delineate the course of history in an understandable way. In the period leading up to the 1848-49 revolution, and concurrently with Zimmermann's work, a three-volume novel about Müntzer appeared from the pen of Theodor Mundt, which was conceived as a "German national novel". Then, after the revolution, it was Hermann Rollet who portrayed Thomas Müntzer as a character symbolizing the selfless fighter for the freedom of the people, for social justice and against servitude and oppression.

At that point in time, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels joined in the discussion about revolutionary theory, historical philosophy and aesthetic questions related to the literary presentation of historical figures from the Peasants' War period – a discussion conducted within the overall framework of the so-called Sickingen debate about a tragic drama written by Ferdinand Lassalle on Franz von Sickingen. They saw Thomas Müntzer, and not Florian Geyer, Götz von Berlichingen or Franz von Sickingen, as the key figure enabling the poet to illustrate basic issues of the revolution and an historical tragedy. They considered it a mistake on the part of Lassalle to place "Lutheran-knightly opposition above the plebeian Mun-
cerian opposition".

For the German working-class movement, Thomas Münt-

zer became the incarnation, the symbol of those revolutionary traditions to which it felt directly committed. August Bebel published a comprehensive writing on the German Peasants' War in 1876 and planned towards the end of the eighties to write a Müntzer biography. Robert Schweichel, a social democrat and friend of Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, portrayed Thomas Müntzer as a tribune of the people in his novel "Um die Freiheit" (For freedom), which appeared at the end of the 19th century, and several new editions of Engels' "Peasant War" were published during these years.

Similarly, an increasing number of independent articles, devoted to the early bourgeois revolution, were published in the working-class press, for instance those by Wilhelm Blos. Initially their main aim was to propagate the revolutionary traditions originating from the Peasants' War. In the course of time, however, individuals emerged from the ranks of Social Democracy who made their own independent studies of specific questions concerning the early bourgeois revolution. They included, notably, Karl Kautsky, whose work stimulated Engels to understand the Reformation and the Peasants' War as the first acts of bourgeois revolution.

When, in the period of transition to imperialism, opportunistic views were spreading on a larger scale within German Social Democracy, the view of history was not left untouched by the process. The opportunists abandoned the revolutionary path to changing society and so, quite logically, they also lost interest in Thomas Müntzer. At the same time, some aspects of the inherited concept of history were upheld by the social democratic membership. It was, above all, Franz Mehring who built upon Marx's and Engels' vision of the early bourgeois revolution, elaborating it more fully and publicizing it.

The first Russian revolution from 1905 to 1907 shed fresh

light on the revolutionary potential inherent in the peasantry and demonstrated the contemporary relevance of the experience gained in the early bourgeois revolution. In his search for ways and means to solve the impending crisis in Russia in the interests of the proletariat, V. I. Lenin analyzed the experience of the European bourgeois revolution and, basing his work on Marx and Engels, he realized that the Reformation and the Peasants' War constituted the first stage of that revolution. In 1907, Rosa Luxemburg demanded that the working-class movement should conduct an active alliance policy vis-à-vis the working peasantry. In so doing, she referred to the lessons of the German Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer.

XII

The smoke screen with which the dominating ideology of history prevented the popular masses from understanding their revolutionary past was torn asunder by the First World War, with its disillusioning effect on broad circles of the German people, the November Revolution, the battles of the post-war crisis and, particularly, by the Great October Socialist Revolution.

While the bourgeoisie, with the foundations of its rule shattered, also fell into a crisis over its understanding of history, the revolutionary German workers who had just found a political home in the young KPD received strong impulses from the revolutionary struggles in Germany and the victory of the working class in Russia, which helped them to recognize their own role in history. The battles fought by Müntzer and his followers in the Peasants' War assumed a new relevance, particularly when directly compared with contemporary revolutionary struggles. It was along these lines that Clara Zetkin paid tribute to Thomas Müntzer as the Spartacus of his time in a booklet published in 1920. As a result of historical analyses of the Reformation and the Peasants' War, Müntzer was accorded greater importance than before, with German com-

munists looking upon him as the model of an unbending leader of popular masses, deeply committed to the revolutionary cause. Comparisons with Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin are indicative of a central aspect of the KPD's vision of Müntzer: how to struggle for power.

Similarly, the Weimar Republic ushered in a new phase of Müntzer reception in bourgeois and Church history. Thomas Müntzer's life and work started being treated more seriously. The first modern, though incomplete, editions of writings by Thomas Müntzer and his correspondence (for instance, by A. Ehrentreich, P. Friedländer, O.H. Brandt, H. Böhmer and P. Kirn), as well as studies on Müntzer's life and theology, now saw publication. On the one hand, these began to make use of real source material, but, on the other, they were dominated by a desire to express clear reservations about the political positions of Müntzer the revolutionary and the theological positions of Müntzer the "heretic".

Left-wing intellectuals such as Hugo Ball, Ludwig von Gerdtell and Ernst Bloch dissociated themselves from the traditional bourgeois view of history, under the impact of the First World War and the revolutionary upheavals at its end and the influence of the working-class movement, turning to the revolutionary traditions of the German people and, hence, to Müntzer.

Led by Ernst Thälmann, German communists comprehensively and systematically appropriated Leninism from the mid-twenties onwards. This also left a decisive mark on their approach to the heritage of the early bourgeois revolution and to Thomas Müntzer. The climax was the 400th anniversary of the Peasants' War in 1925.

This was the first time in German history that the Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer received tribute on a broad scale. The focus was, above all, on the conclusions to be drawn for

the conduct of a policy of alliance with the working peasantry and farm labourers. Edwin Hoernle, Heinrich Rau and Hermann Duncker played the most important part. The party was able, particularly in Thuringia and Central Germany, to rally the working masses under its banner to mark the anniversary. Communist publishing houses brought out the first popular edition of Thomas Müntzer's most important writings as well as a new edition of Robert Schweichel's significant novel about the Peasants' War.

Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' War were time and again chosen as subjects by a nascent socialist German literature. Friedrich Wolf with "Der arme Konrad" (Poor Konrad) and Berta Lask with her Müntzer drama created the foundation for a tradition leading up to the contemporary socialist literature and dramatic art of the GDR. By the same token, painters and sculptors linked with the proletariat demonstrated their commitment to the cause of the people by lending artistic expression to scenes from the Peasants' War. The starting point in this tradition of progressive art was marked by Käthe Kollwitz's works.

The national objectives and elements of the early bourgeois revolution commanded greater attention from the German communists in the struggle against the looming danger of fascism, when they had to take issue with Nazi abuse of the Peasants' War heritage. At the same time, their efforts to involve broad circles of the working population in their struggles resulted in a differentiated view of the relationship between Müntzer and Luther.

The legacy of Thomas Müntzer was also assimilated in a new manner by progressive Christians, including religious socialists such as Emil Fuchs and Hermann Köttschke as well as Emil Blum, head of the Protestant branch of the youth movement (Neuwerk movement). They aspired to social reforms in

the interests of the rural population or supported efforts for an alliance between the working class and small farmers and, in doing so, they referred back to Thomas Müntzer.

When, following the fascist takeover in Germany and the advance of reaction in other countries, the Communist International analysed the new situation, German communists were faced with new and more demanding challenges in laying bare fascist lies as they attempted in their educational work to present a true picture of German history. Knowledge about the history of the Reformation and the Peasants' War was augmented when guidelines issued by the 7th World Congress of the Communist International in 1935 were applied creatively to the antifascist struggle waged by the KPD. In its efforts to establish a popular front the KPD also paid greater attention to those traditions of its allies which would corroborate and justify their political decision in favour of antifascist struggle. Reliance on the revolutionary traditions of the German people had a stimulating effect on the antifascist resistance.

When living in exile, Johannes R. Becher was able to substantiate his belief in a better Germany committed to humanism by invoking the images of great Germans symbolizing the Reformation and the Peasants' War in his expressive and stirring poems. Erich Weinert, who had been occupied with a drama about Müntzer as a young poet, wrote an epic poem in exile about the Peasants' War. It was also in exile that Alex Wedding (Grete Weiskopf) created her narrative "Die Fahne des Pfeiferhänsleins" (The flag of little whistling Hans), and Johannes Wüsten's drama "Weinsberg" was also written in exile. Alexander Abusch, who had emigrated to Mexico, paid tribute to Thomas Müntzer as the "most powerful revolutionary personality of his time" and Ernst Sommer wrote his Müntzer biography in England. The Free Germany National

Committee, based in the Soviet Union, opposed the fascist abuse of German history and emphasized the activities of Thomas Müntzer as culminating points in the freedom-orientated tradition of German history in drawing up a concept of a history of the German people and a programme for school instruction after the liberation of the German people from Nazism.

XIII

Following liberation from the fascist yoke, new horizons were opened up on that long and costly road pursued by the best forces among the German people. The elimination of rule by an exploiting class, an objective Müntzer had fought for, had now become practicable and was accomplished in the democratic antifascist and then the socialist transformation of society.

On 11 June 1945, the KPD launched an appeal to enlist the support of the people for fundamental anti-imperialist changes. In his significant speech in Kyritz on 2 September 1945, Wilhelm Pieck associated the objectives of the democratic land reform with the centuries-old dream of the peasantry and farm labourers that they might one day take the Junkers' land into their own hands. He called to mind the Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer. At the same time, the revolutionary changes carried out, the alliance of the working class with the working peasantry, and the democratic land reform brought with them completely new foundations for an approach to Müntzer and the adoption of his legacy.

The foundation of the GDR, the first workers' and farmers' state in the history of the German people, marked a decisive

turning point in the revolutionary process of transition from capitalism to socialism on German soil. Recollection of the Peasants' War and of Thomas Müntzer played an important role in the development of people's consciousness in the process of antifascist democratic change and the establishment and advancement of socialism in the GDR. A large number of speeches and writings by representatives of the SED leadership, the GDR government and the parties allied in the Democratic Bloc, documents, measures introduced by the working-class party and the socialist state and, not least, the working people in town and country have helped to keep remembrance of the Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer alive and to translate it into vigorous creativity for the benefit of socialist construction. Many agricultural production cooperatives, state farms and factories, horticultural production cooperatives, schools, work teams, formations and barracks of the National People's Army, cultural centres, youth clubs and youth teams in the GDR are named after Thomas Müntzer.

GDR writers and artists have a prominent share in the assimilation of the heritage associated with Müntzer and the Peasants' War. For many of them, recourse to this heritage has turned out to be a very fruitful investigation of the course and driving forces of history, the role of the popular masses, the moral qualities of a revolutionary and the paths leading into a world of peace and social justice. In 1952 Friedrich Wolf wrote his Müntzer drama and in the following years his script for the DEFA feature film on Müntzer, which had its first showing in 1956. Also in 1956, the monument to Müntzer by Will Lammert was unveiled in Mühlhausen. In GDR literature, the revolutionary heritage of the Peasants' War period is upheld with pride and admiration and kept alive in most diverse forms and genres – poems, stage plays, novels and films, but particularly in books for children and teenagers.

Translating into practical reality what the German revolutionaries of the past had fought for, and the consistent orientation of cultural and educational policy towards a comprehensive assimilation of the humanist, revolutionary heritage, have created an atmosphere in the GDR that has lent wings to artistic interpretations of the Peasants' War. A number of significant works in the field of fine art had emerged since the 1950s and almost 80 works depicting the Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer, including several large-scale panel paintings, were shown at GDR exhibitions in preparation for the 450th anniversary of the Peasants' War. In addition, mention should be made of several graphic cycles of broad content. Artists have made a substantial contribution to spreading a socialist view of history and developing socialist realism in fine art by dealing with a wide range of problems from different angles using diverse forms of expression and composition, and this is also strongly evident in portrayals of Thomas Müntzer.

Fine art depicting the Peasants' War enriches cultural life in the GDR and is of great importance as part of the overall adoption and interpretation of this significant historical event in the fields of science, literature, education and the arts. This is reflected in an outstanding manner in Werner Tübke's panorama in the Peasants' War memorial at Bad Frankenhausen. Exhibitions organized in the past few years are evidence that GDR artists are still interested in the Peasants' War and in Thomas Müntzer, and are repeatedly inspired to deal with the subject in new ways.

XIV

On the road to socialism and in the course of its development, preservation and cultivation of the revolutionary, progressive heritage have invariably been essential elements in the way the GDR and its citizens regard themselves. In keeping with social requirements after 1945, which especially meant activating the revolutionary democratic traditions of the German people and applying them to democratic antifascist transformation, the budding Marxist science of history in the GDR always looked upon the Peasants' War and the life of Thomas Müntzer as a significant area of study. It drew considerably on the analyses carried out by Friedrich Engels, whose writing on the Peasants' War has been published in very large editions on repeated occasions since 1946. It is symptomatic that the science of history in the GDR has also received major impulses from the Soviet sciences. The book written by M. M. Smirin in 1947 on Thomas Müntzer's people's reformation – which also appeared in a German translation in 1952 and 1956 – is a highly fruitful contribution to deepening our understanding of these revolutionary traditions.

Major steps towards more profound study of the Reforma-

tion and the Peasants' War by historical scholars in the GDR include Alfred Meusel's efforts to spread the Marxist view of Müntzer, the discussions conducted in 1952 about the layout of the German History Museum, the conference of the Historians' Society held in Wernigerode under the chairmanship of Max Steinmetz in 1960 and the contributions made by Manfred Bensing and others to studies of Thomas Müntzer's life and work. In dealing with the Reformation and the Peasants' War as a single process, an early bourgeois revolution, a comprehensive historical materialist interpretation of this significant chapter of German history has been elaborated which makes it possible to evaluate the great figures of these events, Luther and Müntzer, in a new and differentiated manner, with major repercussions for the cultivation of tradition and the historical heritage.

Further progress in elaborating and propagating the Marxist-Leninist view of the early bourgeois revolution was, above all, associated with the 450th anniversary in 1967 of Luther's theses being nailed to the church door at Wittenberg, and the 450th anniversary of the Peasants' War and Thomas Müntzer's death in 1975. It was possible to look at these events from an overall European perspective and to delineate them in significant publications.

The homage paid to Thomas Müntzer on the 450th anniversary of his death in 1975 also aided and encouraged a re-evaluation of Müntzer within the framework of Protestantism in the GDR. While in the fifties he had still been considered an impassioned outsider and for this reason had only been dealt with, in fiction and academic study, by a few progressive clergy such as Karl Kleinschmidt, Thomas Müntzer's work was then adopted in an independent manner and made a part of the heritage upheld by the Church in socialist society.

After the 8th SED Congress, as an advanced socialist so-

ciety developed in the course of the 1970s, conditions posed new tasks. It was a matter of proving that the GDR is rooted in German history as a whole and demonstrating the share which all social classes and strata and their representatives have had in the historical progress incarnated today by the GDR as a socialist German state. The 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth in 1983 marked a high point in studying the historical legacy of bourgeois figures who, on account of their social affiliation, remained aloof from the social struggles of the working classes and strata but, under the conditions of their time and in interaction with the different class forces, had a revolutionary impact conducive to historical progress. By the same token, there was a broader understanding of the social relevance of theological concepts in an age when all world outlooks were marked by religion. This had repercussions for the prevailing view of Müntzer, and particularly for our understanding of Müntzer's theological motivations. It was thus not only possible to adopt a differentiated approach to our historical heritage, but also, most specifically, to penetrate deeper into the relationship between Luther and Müntzer and their theologies, a relationship between representatives and ideologists who adhered to different class formations in one and the same revolution: the bourgeois moderate and the revolutionary democratic stream. Erich Honecker pointed out in 1983: "It is important for the sense of history and tradition in our people, living as they are in a socialist society, that Luther and Müntzer should not be counterposed from the very outset as figures constituting irreconcilable opposites. They must be comprehended dialectically as the two great personalities of the first German revolution."

Both Luther and Müntzer form an inseparable part of the traditions to which the GDR feels committed. When paying tribute to Thomas Müntzer in 1989, the GDR will honour

that personality of the early bourgeois revolution and, through him, those traditions which are associated with the revolutionary struggle waged by the oppressed and exploited masses of the people for a better life based on social equality and security. These traditions are jointly upheld by the working class, the class of cooperative farmers, indeed all working strata in our republic, the parties and mass organizations, citizens holding different world outlooks and religions in the continuing process of building an advanced socialist society, thus making a valuable contribution to solving the key issue facing humanity today: the safeguarding of peace.

PANORAMA DDR – Auslandspresseagentur GmbH
Wilhelm Pieck Strasse 49, Berlin, DDR - 1054
Translated by Intertext
Verlag Zeit im Bild
Julian Grimau Allee, Dresden, DDR - 8012
Printed in the German Democratic Republic
by Grafischer Grossbetrieb Völkerfreundschaft Dresden
8256-2